

**Texas Solutions Forum for the White House Conference on Aging**

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**Panel: Our Community Services and Supports  
Strengthening Support for Family Caregivers as a Solution**

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**ISSUE**

According to a National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP (NAC/AARP) study,” 44.4 million Americans 18 or older are providing unpaid care to an adult. If we had to pay for this care, it would cost approximately 257 million dollars.” The study also notes that many caregivers fulfill multiple roles and most have worked and managed caregiving responsibilities at the same time (74%). These data, along with others support the need for our country’s continued preparation for aging baby boomers as both caregivers and care recipients; community based services must be strategically developed and carefully implemented.

With the implementation of family caregiver support programs throughout our country to support caregivers of older adults and older caregivers, we have seen many programs in place that are responsive and are helping in some way to meet the challenges faced by those individuals/families providing care. However, as we move forward in **strengthening support for family caregivers** and their expressed needs, we must give greater attention to identifying the different types of caregivers and their different types of issues and needs. Spousal caregivers, grandparents, adult children, working, long distance, caregivers of persons with mental retardation may each have different

caregiving needs. Thus we must build supportive systems, which actually are directed at different caregivers during their different times in their caregiving journey. We must adequately assess what are the needs of caregivers themselves, which will promote their own ability to age well, as well as being of value in their provision of support to the care recipient(s). What are some of the

### **SOLUTIONS:**

#### **Caregiver Assessment Tools/Instruments**

Develop appropriate assessment tools, which will paint the necessary picture of caregiver challenges within the environment in which he/she is functioning; family, home, work, church, social , financial , health status etc.. Some, if not all, play critical roles in trying to perform caregiving roles satisfactorily. Perhaps, when appropriate, assessments should include a family caregiver approach when addressing multi-generational households, “in the middle” caregivers and the like.

#### **Community Resource Assessments**

A thorough assessment/inventory of community resources, which are available to provide ancillary support to caregivers, is also critical in putting together a responsive system of supportive services. This will also help to avoid duplication of efforts while maximizing available resources, especially when funding constraints are challenging.

## **Caregiver Information, Education and Training, Respite and Health Promotion Programs and Services**

The provision of caregiver education and information is key, if both caregivers and organizations providing assistance are to have a successful and meaningful linkage with each other and service provision. Developing appropriate lay literature/ tools and training programs, which help caregivers in “caring” for the care recipient, as well as the ability to determine their capacity to continue care provision at various stages, are essential. Education and training programs must be tailored to the diversity of caregiver audiences, which may exist in any given community.

Finding time for self and managing emotions and physical stress are two major expressed unmet needs in the NAC/AARP Study. These are indicative of the need to further develop different types of respite programs, which allow for a broader array of tasks and flexibility in providing relief and assistance to caregivers. Family Caregiver Alliance in its Women and Caregiving: Facts and Figures, states “Higher levels of depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges are common among women who care for an older relative or friend”. Support group networks and available mental health counseling which target the needs of special caregivers, such as women must also be tailored and structured accordingly. Implementation of evidenced-based health programs for caregivers, particularly those suffering from chronic illnesses, should be given priority consideration.

## **Service Delivery Systems**

If the focus is indeed on meeting caregivers' needs, then, where feasible, organizations must be willing to re-examine Monday through Friday, 8-5 service delivery approaches.

Support Groups must be held when it is convenient for the majority of caregivers; likewise, the need for respite may vary depending on the caregiver(s) need for relief.

We live in an age of advanced information technology, which affords many caregivers the opportunity to access valuable information via websites. This convenience helps to bridge the information gap for those who are unable to attend educational sessions. Ease of access to services for caregivers should be at the forefront of all service planning.

As efforts continue to move forward towards developing integrated community based services to support family caregiving, we must analyze the available support from public and private funding sectors, as well as maximize the use of established volunteer programs, which support caregivers in their respective communities, among which includes many faith-based care teams, youth based volunteer programs and well known programs such as the Senior Companion Program.

Assisting aging baby boomers to be good caregivers, while giving attention to their own physical and mental well being, presents challenges and opportunities for strengthening support for family caregivers. It is reflected in the **State of Aging and Health in America 2004**, "the dramatic gain in life expectancy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, in large measure, due to improved sanitation, better medical care and increased use of preventive

health services. A key challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to ensure that these added years are quality years”. This must be true for family caregivers as well.

Thus, as we plan community based services for caregivers, these services should not be viewed just as a product or service to be delivered, but a product or service which enhances the well being of the caregiver and care recipient for the long term and indeed has a positive impact of their quality of life.

#### References:

1. National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP Study  
Women and Caregiving: Facts and Figures, Family Caregiver Alliance,  
National Center on Caregiving
3. Fact Sheet: Side-by-Side Comparison of Family Caregiving Prevalence  
Studies, National Center on Caregiving
4. The State of Aging and Health in America 2004, Merck Institute of Aging